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AUTHOR Tidwell, Deborah L.; Stele, Jeannie L.
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ABSTRACT

Through an in-depth interview, a study investigated teachers' beliefs and understandings about language learning. Subjects were nine elementary school teachers from a suburban midwest school district where a whole language philosophy was beginning to become infused in the curriculum. Subjects were selected for participation based on the teachers' degree of involvement/experience in whole language instruction (MUCH, SOME, LITTLE) as determined by self report by the teacher, reports from administration, and documented training and participation in whole language. Interviews were transcribed and coded. Results indicated that: (1) the MUCH group talked about the teacher as facilitator, while the LITTLE group talked about the teacher as a director of the learning environment; (2) the MUCH group discussed instructional practices as embedded in the whole, where students as readers/writers became members of the literacy club; (3) the LITTLE group discussed instructional activities that often focused on the skills needed by students as determined by the teacher; (4) the LITTLE group saw themselves as second-hand diagnosticians, while the MUCH group viewed assessment as an interactive process where the teacher highlights the literacy development of the child; (5) the LITTLE group offered simplistic definitions of whole language, while the MUCH group included in their definition, terms such as ownership, making connections, and facilitating natural learning; and (6) the SOME group expressed diverse opinions on all aspects of whole language. Findings suggest that the beliefs of the teachers fell into a continuum that could be considered a gauge of their understanding and beliefs about whole language. (Contains 19 references.) (RS)

I Teach What I Know: An Examination of Teachers' Beliefs About Whole Language

Deborah L. Tidwell, Ph.D.
Jeannie L. Stele, Ph.D.
University of Northern Iowa

There has been increasing interest in whole language in recent years, with many school districts embracing a whole language philosophy toward language learning. However, the implementation of programs vary depending on the perceived meaning of whole language instruction. Though much has been written about whole language, definitions are vague and elusive, perhaps because the concept itself is broad and encompasses beliefs about all language learning and the context of that learning (Goodman, 1986). Whole language, as a philosophy about teaching and learning rather than a method, involves an abstract concept that is based mainly on beliefs and attitudes about learning and teaching (Cambourne, 1989).

There is evidence of misunderstanding and misinterpretations in the implementation of whole language (Bergeron, 1990). There is also a lack of clarity as to what whole language means from an instructional point of view, even among the most respected researchers in the field of reading. Often the misunderstandings arise as a result of overemphasis on the application of whole language learning without a complete understanding of the theory. While specific instructional practices may vary from class to class, from a theoretical perspective whole language teachers share a concensus of beliefs about language learning. Specifically, language learning involves the child actively engaged in the process of learning (Goodman, 1989b). In such a classroom instructional practices, materials chosen and topics to be covered would include the input of the children and would represent the teacher's attempt to integrate the child's prior knowledge and experiences with current instructional activities (Taba, 1962). Text would include authentic pieces from authors as well as the authentic texts written by the children (Clay, 1972; Huck & Kuhn, 1968). Reading and writing would be interwoven, and integrated across the curriculum (Cambourne, 1988). Specifically, natural literacy involves the following conditions for learning: immersion, expectation, demonstration, employment, feedback, responsibility, and approximation (Cambourne, 1988).

The vast majority of teachers, however, are interested in application rather than theory (Ridley, 1990), reflecting the urgency about what to do in the classroom tomorrow (Fountas & Hannigan, 1989). In addition, there are many situations in which incompatible and contradictory concepts are being implemented as whole language (Goodman, 1989a). Given the widely varying conceptions of what encompasses a whole language program, it seems important to understand teacher beliefs about and attitudes toward whole language, clarifying how and why whole language instruction varies across classrooms and across school sites.

The whole notion of examining teacher beliefs stems from investigations which focused on the connection between a teacher's stated beliefs and that teacher's instruction in the classroom (Duffy, 1981; Hoffman & Kugle, 1982; Richardson, Anders, Tidwell, & Lloyd, 1991). A belief can be defined as a statement of a relationship among things accepted as being true (Fenstermacher, 1979; Richardson et al, 1991). To the teacher these beliefs conceptually represent a valid reality which guides personal thought and action (Harvey, 1986).

Teachers' beliefs derived from predetermined theory measures give some notion of the ways in which teachers believe but are not always clearly demonstrated in the ways in which those same teachers teach (Duffy, 1981; Hoffman & Kugle, 1982). Interviews with open-ended procedures that target both general instructional settings and specific learners and instructional situations elicit more accurate portrayals of what teachers believe (Richardson et al., 1991).

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a study which investigated teachers' beliefs and understandings about language learning elicited through an in depth interview. The specific question addressed in this investigation is: What are the beliefs of teachers concerning language learning based on a whole language philosophy? This paper is part of a larger study investigating the relationship of teacher beliefs, classroom practices and prior experience to language learning and instruction.

THE STUDY

SUBJECTS

Subjects were nine elementary school teachers from a suburban Midwest school district where a whole language philosophy is just beginning to become infused in the curricular and instructional decisions of the district. Teachers volunteered to participate in a get-acquainted meeting where an initial overview of the study was proposed and teachers filled out surveys on reading and on experience with whole language. Selection for participation in the study was based on the teachers' degree of involvement/experience in whole language instruction as determined by self report by the teacher, reports from administration, and documented training and participation in whole language. Degree of involvement was determined in the following ways: LITTLE/NONE was defined as a beginner or minimally involved in the philosophy of whole language and minimally experienced in whole language instruction in the classroom; SOME was defined as a somewhat experienced individual in that s/he is beginning to implement instruction across the curriculum based in a whole language philosophy; and, MUCH was defined as an experienced individual in that s/he has an ongoing instructional program within the classroom based on whole language beliefs.

INSTRUMENT AND PROCEDURES

The belief interview was originally developed as a heuristic elicitation technique by anthropologists to determine belief systems in groups of people (Metzger, 1973) and more recently adapted and used effectively in investigations of teachers' beliefs about reading (Richardson, 1990; Richardson et al., 1991). The belief interview is designed to evoke both a teacher's public beliefs about reading, writing, and language learning, and more private beliefs of specific students and situations (Goodenough, 1971). The interview, incorporated open-ended questions to construct the teacher's world view and close-ended questions for confirmation by the interviewer.

Each interview was audio taped at the teacher's school site after school hours, averaging one hour in length. Each teacher was interviewed once by one of three researchers. The interviews were transcribed.

DATA ANALYSIS

An initial categorical coding system was developed using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). All interviews were initially read by two researchers. Three randomly chosen transcripts were analyzed separately by the same two researchers, with categories emerging for each of

the interviews. In addition, previously determined coding schemes (Richardson et al., 1991) were evaluated for applicability. A common coding system was then developed and used across all nine interviews.

Chunks of dialogue in each of the interviews were coded using this developed categorical scheme. Each category was then separately filtered across all nine interviews using HyperQual (Padilla, 1991), resulting in a running text of direct quotes from all interviews relating to each particular category. Direct quotes from transcribed interviews regarding each category were then synthesized into statements. Results from this categorization process were compiled within each experience level (Little, Some, Much) and across all three levels to determine relationships of beliefs both within group and across groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In examining the results of the data analysis, it became less clear that the teachers consistently fell into three categories for description (much, some, little) but rather they fell into a continuum that could be considered a gage of their understanding and beliefs about whole language. Overall, the three groups (much, little, some) could be represented in the manner in which they discussed the role of the student and the role of the teacher, the choice of instructional practices and the materials chosen for instruction, assessment of students' learning, and their own definition of whole language.

Role of the teacher and the student. There was a distinct difference in the way that the group labelled as having much experience in whole language talked about the role of both the student and the teacher when compared to the group labelled as having little experience. The MUCH group talked about the teacher as a facilitator, who provided direct instruction that emerged from the needs of the students. In addition, the MUCH group believed each student has the responsibility to make the learning experience meaningful and has the right to choice in topics to be instructed, materials to be used, projects to be completed, and evaluation of work. The rationale for a lesson not being successful was that the children were unable to engage in the lesson at an active level, but this was due to the design of the lesson (and therefore the teacher) rather than the students. Overall locus of control for learning was within the child, while the locus of control for instruction and instructional decisions were within the teacher.

The group labeled as having LITTLE experience talked about the teacher as a director of the learning environment. The teacher determined the topics and materials through an a priori determination of needed skills for a particular lesson. Students' tasks were often determined by the teachers and the evaluation of students' work was the sole responsibility of the teacher. Students were seen as more passive in the learning environment, where choice was provided in a limited scale for materials to read and occasionally for projects to be completed (with guidelines set by the teacher). The locus of control for instruction was both within the teacher and outside the teacher (administrative controls, district controls). The locus of control for learning was also within the teacher.

The group labelled as having SOME experience in whole language provided the most diverse responses and were least likely of a group to have generalizable statements. These teachers talked about the role of the teacher as a facilitator that directed the lesson. The locus of control for learning was with the child, yet the locus of control for instruction and evaluation of the lesson was with the teacher.

Instructional practices and materials. The most notable contrast came in the teachers' discussions of the materials they currently use and plan

to use in the future and the actual instructional practices currently used in the classroom. The MUCH group had materials that were representative of a whole language classroom (trade books, children's own writing, varied assess to variety of types of materials) and practices that focused on the child's interests, beginning at where the child's level of understanding was and building on the child's strengths. In addition, MUCH group often talked of the children's role in instruction as one that instigates new instructional ideas, topics, etc. The instructional practices were interrelated to other curriculum areas, and the practices were tied to specific themes and related to student-determined or teacher-determined/student-negotiated purposes. Overall the MUCH group discussed instructional practices as embedded in the whole, where students as readers and writers became members of the literacy club. The development of literacy is a process embedded within a child's reading and writing experiences. However, one of the teachers labeled as MUCH (M3a), provided several examples in her discussion that suggested a stronger emphasis in skills and segmented instruction. This interesting contrast suggests that the continuum may be more representative of these nine teachers.

In contrast, the LITTLE group discussed using materials representative of both a whole language classroom and a more traditional skills-based classroom, but the instructional activities often focused on the skills needed by the students as determined by the teacher. The instructional practices were reflective of a teacher-directed, teacher-determined focus, with lessons that were not clearly interrelated to other curricular lessons, built on step by step skills to be taught and mastered. There were some indications of a discomfort by these teachers to use "writer's workshop and inventive spelling that don't work" (Kkc).

Again, the SOME group represented the most diversity in approaches. Depending on the context of the lesson, teachers varied in the available student choice of materials and tasks. The teachers were in agreement that the freedom given to students does help students gain ownership in their work and thus produce better work. But there is an underlying concern that there is not enough time to try these different ways of teaching reading and writing and still effectively meet the demands of the district for using the basal. (the district had set a limit of not more than 50% of use of basal - teachers saw this as a mandate to use 50% of the basal).

Assessment. The LITTLE group sees themselves as second-hand diagnosticians, with the test(s) representing the "expert." These teachers hold a more typical traditional view with a skills focus, where they teach the skills to be tested from the basal, and use pages from skills packs to reinforce. They give unit tests as pretest and the test results guide instruction. They retest after instruction in the skills in which the students were lacking (from pretest). They feel a responsible teacher gives all the basal tests to be thorough. In addition, observation and anecdotal records are part of assessment, but the focus is on skills (both skills acquired and skills still needed).

In contrast, the MUCH group viewed assessment as an interactive process with the child, where the teacher, through anecdotal records, conferencing, discussion, and observation, highlights the literacy development of the child, focusing on growth and strength as well as need. Assessment includes portfolios that include child-chosen and teacher-chosen work, transcripts of conferences, captioning, including artifacts from the entire writing process. Evaluation to parents includes both a summative and formative narrative description of the child. However, one of the MUCH

teachers still relies heavily on skills-based assessment (pre- and post tests, GINN testing, etc). From this perspective she is more in tune with the assessment beliefs of teachers in the LITTLE group.

The SOME group represented a group in flux, beginning to try new ways of assessing but not willing to give up the more traditional ways. *O1a - The reading tests are a valuable tool, but I don't think you can use that alone to tell you. I think again that you can go back to enjoyment and see if they enjoy reading and I think that is one of the important things. But I do think using a portfolio and using notes about what you were looking for (is good)..*

Whole language definition. The LITTLE group had very simplistic definitions for whole language. The integration of language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. *(If) I had to come up with an all-encompassing definition, I suppose it's the intertwining of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening. That's kind of what I think of it as. (Kkc)*

In contrast, the MUCH group included in their definition terms such as ownership, making connections, facilitating natural learning. An example in which they defined whole language was, *(M3a) I guess if you ask me to define it I would probably change the term to natural literacy just because I think whole language just gets over used...you are trying to take what you are teaching and you are making it more natural for that child and it is also kind of on their journey.*

The SOME group, like the LITTLE group, related reading and writing together, and highlighted the importance of it being ongoing not something to isolate. Their focus is on the skills or group of skills that you are developing with whole language. (O1a) *There isn't any definition because it changes.*

All groups talked about reading daily to the students as an important part of learning to read. Modeling how to be a reader, and providing mini-lessons on specific skills/strategies were important. All teachers agreed that there is a connection between reading and writing, that good readers become better readers when they write.

Realistically, all nine teachers can best be represented on a continuum. Their placements on this continuum would vary depending on the category being represented. However, these nine teachers when compared against each other, can be generally represented in the following continuum.

Kkc---K6a-----K3b---**Lka---O1a---N3a**-M3a----L2b--------L6c

This continuum also represents teachers in flux, or in change. All these teachers, except L6c, have demonstrated conflicting beliefs in their literacy instruction. Questions eliciting public beliefs, such as asking teachers to define whole language, or to share an ideal, provided answers that more closely aligned with a whole language philosophy. It was when teachers discussed their private beliefs, such as relating to particular good and poor students, or revealing specific instructional moments in the classroom having a definite instructional context and purpose, that more traditional skills based views and teacher-control issues were uncovered. These conflicts in public and private beliefs suggests teachers in turmoil, teachers in change.

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